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Content with Style: Gertrude Stein and Tori Amos

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An idea was proposed to me in conversation: "Is it smarter to be able to solve differential equations in your head, or to easily solve them with a calculator, assuming both methods will get the same answer?" If Gertrude Stein can be said to choose the more intellectual approach, Tori Amos is standing next to her, punching away at her calculator. In their writing, the two women achieve similar results, which stem from the need of women to break linguistic convention through experimental writing. It is important to look at the methods of the experiments, in this instance, the meticulously thoughtful approach of Gertrude Stein, as opposed to Tori Amos's perhaps "low brow" approach. But Amos's writing, however unrefined, may be wildly more accessible than Stein's, and thus serves as the missing link between Stein's writing and convention.

"Act so that there is no use in a centre." -Stein, "Rooms," *Tender Buttons*

Gertrude Stein's writing, particularly her "lively words," is extremely difficult to categorize or to make generalizations about. More accurately, this task is impossible. Her writing is taxing and often frustrating to read; yet, there can be much pleasure attained from the reading. She challenges us to read unconventionally, to "be in" the experience without being in control of the experience (Berry, 18). This means resisting tendencies of sense making, especially when sense-making attempts to focus Stein's words into a central idea. For the most part, there is no plot or story in Stein; she tells the story of style and language.

"A cushion has that cover. Supposing you do not like to change, supposing it is very clean that there is no change in appearance, supposing that there is regularity and a costume is that any the worse than an oyster and an exchange." Later on: "What is the sash like. The sash is not like anything mustard it is not like a same thing that has stripes, it is not even more hurt than that, it has a little top." -Excerpted from "Substance in a Cushion," *Tender Buttons* (10-11)

First, I would like to note that I have taken sections from the middle and end of the piece, and that that fact is irrelevant. Though it seems the two sections could not possibly have come from the same piece, they have; furthermore, the words between

the two sections do not help them come together in a way that makes sense. This is the beauty of Stein. I can open up *Tender Buttons* to any page and plunge in because there is no conventional order. Much like Stein says in *What Are Masterpieces* that (traditionally) writing must "use beginning and ending to become existing," Stein must use a book for her writing to exist (Gray 51). The form "book" is only a vehicle through which her writing exists; it is in fact a disservice to her writing that it is put into a book because with "book" comes certain expectations. Marianne DeKoven articulates a similar idea: "All the syntactical structures of the [early 'lively words'] style are logical, expository, almost argumentative: the grammatical sign of exactly the kind of patriarchal-symbolic writing which Stein subverts here, and vastly different in tone from whimsical phrases such as 'move in the shoe.' These logical structures work to make us expect coherent meaning" (72). Of course, there is no coherent meaning.

Stein does not allow the reader to have expectations. She is unflaggingly unpredictable. In my reading notes, I write, "If we see the word 'picket,' the next word is likely 'fence.' We probably read f----. This can't happen in reading Stein." It is precisely this kind of automatic association that she violently avoids and attempts to disrupt, as it seems that to her, all words have been made cliché. When on a lecture tour, Stein was asked about "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." Her reply is rather lengthy, but in essence she says words have been used and used and are mostly used up, dried up. There is a need to breathe some life back into them, which she believes she's done with "rose." She says, "I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years" (Gray 56-57). As this is a transcript of a lecture, I would even argue that she might have said, "the rose is *read* for the first time..." It is Stein speaking; she probably said both red and read. In my own experience, it was read. For me, "A rose is a rose" reads very fast, but I come to a screeching halt as I move into "is a rose is a rose." Though I can see the same pattern of words, there must be a reason for it, so I slow down and pay attention, which is what Stein wants.

Nancy Gray writes, "Stein paid attention. Her interaction with words made a process, an endless sensitivity to movement [...] But paying attention is movement, and without movement there is no life. At her most attentive, Stein made what she called her 'lively words.'" (39). If one reads picket f----, s/he is not paying attention, and if 'fence' is the word written, attention is not needed. It is probably more common than we realize, this skimming over of typically adjacent words. After the toil of writing a book, an author cannot be sure the words are really even read. It is this Stein prevents, as she forces the reader to pay close attention; there can be no skimming, because she has laboriously disassociated groups of words that usually collaborate to make meaning. (Ironically, they lose meaning because of overuse and over-association.)

DeKoven reports on Stein's concern with word choice, "As Stein says, in praise of Elizabethan writing, 'it was the specific word next to the specific word next it chosen

to be next it that was the important thing' ('What is English Literature,' 31). It is in the jostling of word against word, just as much as in the simple vibrance of the words themselves, that this style is 'lively'" (69). The words themselves *are* somehow vibrant, though extremely common. How is it that a word like "cushion" can come alive?

Play word association. The word is "cushion." We think sitting, couch, chair, maybe the flowered pattern of the upholstery on our own couch cushions; all of these associations are obvious and endlessly boring. In writing, we would only be able to write "couch cushion" or "sat on a cushion," and the word is lost, as it calls no attention to itself. But if we go another step in the word association, starting with "sitting," for example, we might think standing, baby-sitting, lap, and sitting duck. Now we could write "ducky cushion" or "baby cushion baby." While I'm certain Stein had some kind of method for creating "lively words," it was likely more sophisticated than this. As well, I am sure she would find fault with my examples, as she does with her own early "lively words." In *A Transatlantic Interview 1946,* about "A Piece of Coffee," she says, "'Dirty is yellow.' Dirty has an association and is a word that I would not use now. I would not use words that have definite associations." (26). Movement in her "lively words" relies heavily on the multiplicity of the words used, which ensures meaning cannot be pinned down to fix them firmly in place. It is then that words would become the type that can be skimmed.

In the same interview, Stein quotes "a great teacher, William James. He said, 'Never reject anything.'" (34). This is a quote that many critics, Gray for example, seem to attribute to Stein herself, as they claim that "she rejects nothing" (55). But earlier in the interview, doesn't Stein reject the word dirty? Are not the words with definite associations the ones that need rescuing? After some thought, I think Stein meant simply that she would not use the word dirty with the word yellow, not that she would not use the word dirty at all. Maybe "Dirty is blue" is a better choice.

At first glance, what Stein appears to be doing in *Tender Buttons* is redefining "objects," for instance, "Eye Glasses." The entry reads, "A color in shaving, a saloon is well placed in the centre of an alley" (21). None of these words seem to have any tie to eye glasses, and so the reader wonders what it is that she is doing, if not describing. "[...] Neither listing nor a title (condensation) joined to a prose passage (explanation) makes a description. Stein most effectively undercuts the descriptive mode by using structures associated with description, yet disrupting their functioning through lexical illogicalities and gaps" (Murphy 144). Stein's "illogicality" in her descriptions does not in fact describe the title object at all. (Here we see another way that Stein disallows the form "book," in her play with format such that it relates to subdivisions within books.)

In description, the goal is to further the meaning of the thing described. "[Stein] attacked, as itself a convention, the reality of meaning-content itself" (Jackson 246). This seems accurate, that she did not attack meaning-content, but its reality. What she did in her "descriptions" furthered the meaning of what was described in show-

ing that the meaning did not have to be fixed. It seems important to look into the multiple meanings within the descriptions, not as an attempt to solve them, but to hear Stein. Margueritte Murphy protests, "But the often riddle-like quality of Stein's prose implies that several meanings are there, and we do Stein an injustice if we ignore what she has to say, or deny that she has anything to say" (139). As responsible readers, we should not silence Stein, but again, "be in" the text without trying to solve it. It seems we need to be able to read at several paces (simultaneously)—fast, to experience the jouissance coming from the word choice and combination, slow, to see the multiplicity of meaning, and medium, to prevent us from focusing entirely on one or the other.

It can't be denied that it is difficult to read Stein. She is quite inaccessible to most, whether she is thought intimidating or wrong. "Her work appears to have a certain amount of real virtue, but to understand or apprehend that virtue a reader would have to study Miss Stein's methods for years, and intimately" (Sitwell 45). This is my feeling; I am especially out of line for then writing about her writing after only being introduced to her a few months ago. But even Stein scholars seem reluctant to write about her writing. Nancy Gray states, "Writing about what Stein wrote, then, seems always somehow to do it a disservice" (40). Because Stein has such a streamlined way of choosing words to put together, and it cannot be completely understood, she cannot be written about in a way that would completely meet her standards. So her writing remains inaccessible to a degree, even for those who recognize there is value in it.

There are many who do not feel this admiration for her, and would criticize her work, labeling it as nonsense and simply wrong. "T.S. Eliot has said of Miss Stein's work that 'it is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind'" (Riding 156). But it is all of these things, if one reads with openness. This view does not so much criticize her for resisting convention, it seems to claim that the "conventions" she works against are not convention, but the way things are, need to be, ought to be—and should not be messed with! Furthermore, Riding says, "Tradition [...] is unity, and contemporary criticism is busy saying this; but contemporary poetry is not unity because it is busy proving how distressing the absence of unity is [...]" (182). Distressing. The absence of tradition is distressing. I would love to dismiss this type of reader as lacking in imagination, but there is more to it than that. They probably feel that they've had a carpet pulled out from under them, and there is no floor underneath, but chocolate pudding or the color red. "But there should be a floor there," they say, as they put the carpet back. This is the same kind of rejection that happens with Stein's writing; instead of trying it out, going with it, "being in" it, it is not considered an option because it is violates their sense of what "is." Stein is inaccessible to these readers, because they are beyond intimidated, and are *afraid*. They like words to have the same meaningless meaning as always because it makes sense that way and there is safety in it.

"It's so easy to create SoundBits. It's really hard to create beauty."
–Tori Amos, www.stuff.toC

Tori Amos's writing is quite beautiful throughout, and much of this beauty comes from wordplay, such as the phrase "sad blue skies," from the song "Blue Skies" (www.stuff.toB). In "Little Earthquakes," Amos writes, "Good year for hunters/and Christmas parties/and I hate/and I hate/and I hate/and I hate elevator music/The way we fight/The way I'm left here silent." Though at a lower intensity, and with already apparent differences (especially where content is concerned), Amos writes in ways that are reminiscent of Stein. Amos also feels the idea of Stein's "lively words," as she says, "I think it's fantastic when my voice helps [the songs] find their own. Their personality is still asleep, and I feel like a princess kissing them awake" (www.stuff.toA).

"Sad blue skies" is a neat little phrase with a Wheel of Fortune "Before and After" quality. The correlation between sad and blue is clear, along with the familiar notion of blue skies. When these two common associations (sad=blue, blue skies) are put together, as a play on "blue," an interesting contrast is revealed. Amos often plays with pat phrases like "blue skies," thus calling attention to them; often she disrupts their meaning, and here, shows how funny it is to assign "blue" to contradictory meanings.

The lines from "Little Earthquakes" are also playful, as the lines can be assembled in several ways. Is may be a "good year for hunters and Christmas parties and 'I hate,'" which would make "I hate" a noun. Note that "and I hate" appears four times, and only once is assigned to something (elevator music). All four could be leading up to "elevator music," if it is especially offensive to the speaker. Or a couple could belong to "The way we fight/The way I'm left here silent." The point is that there is a multiplicity in her language not completely unlike Stein's. We cannot pin down what she is saying, but we do know there is a story behind it, which would not happen with Stein.

In the song "Wednesday," Amos writes, "Something is with us/I can't put my finger on-is Thumbalina size 10 on a Wednesday." (Amos does not use punctuation, so I have represented the flow of the words as I hear it. On-is is not a mistake, as the two words are so rushed together.) What is most attractive about these lines is the play with finger and thumb, since neither really means the digit itself. "Finger" here is part of one of these pat phrases, and is used figuratively, and "thumb" is represented by the name of a storybook character; yet, they are linked by the shared quality of being digits. Like Stein, she has a concern with word association. But unlike Stein, she uses associated words in close proximity to one another, which is very effective in pointing out that there are many ways that "finger" and "thumb" can exist on their own. Amos shows that the words can exist outside their definition of being digits, and further, that an automatic association between the two words is illogical.

> "Life lines and suicide crimes—he found me in a state grabbed my purse and hitched a ride with mrs. jesus 'how you been' I've been cruisin' a good invention but in some ways I don't think it gets any easier *your walking on the water Bit by far my favorite one, But now it seems we're drowning in a drop of water Love and even as I'm climbing up the stairs I know there's Heaven there and then Empty arms that comes with the Morning Star* well, made my bed of cut roses by understanding that the cause it just comes first with my mrs. jesus the Gospel changes meaning if you follow John or Paul and could you ever Let it be the Mary of it all [chorus] well, Life Lines and suicide crimes there's something every day and there's someone always paging my mrs. jesus [chorus] so if you get the Jones at the crossroads the personals are great If you're my way let me love you mrs. jesus"
>
> -Tori Amos, "mrs. jesus," *Scarlet's Walk*

This is a delightful song, and seemed only appropriate to show more than just bits and pieces of Amos's work. Some of the better examples to take from here are: "mrs. jesus," "climbing up the stairs," and "bed of cut roses." There is an obvious multiplicity in "mrs. jesus"—it could be the wife of Jesus, Amos could be making reference to Jesus being a woman, etc. Really there is no answer, but Amos wants us to question the cultural definition of Jesus. This is a particularly bold move since the spiritual beliefs of many people rest on the accepted definition. "Climbing up the stairs," in itself, is not very interesting, but when Amos sings the line, it is more like "and-even as-I'm climb-ing up…the-stairs I-know there's-Heaven-there" and so on. She breaks up the familiar phrase "climbing up the stairs," which calls attention to it. The phrases leading up to "the stairs" are in chunks, there is a pause before "the stairs," then after, the chunks set the pacing again. The "bed of cut roses" has several references, such as rose petals strewn across a bed, and a crown of thorns, both of which have associations in the song. Here again, we see the multiplicity in Amos's words, and again we see the play on the multiplicity as it relates to content and meaning. Accessibility is not such an issue with Amos's writing, simply because it is possible to do a close reading of her work with content as a facilitator.

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There is a formula to put Stein and Amos into, which can perhaps best compare the accessibility of their work. DeKoven discusses the model put forth by Noam Chomsky. "Chomsky makes his case for these degrees [conventionally grammatical, 'semi-grammatical,' and ungrammatical] most convincing simply by giving a list of examples of each degree ([DeKoven] reversed the order in which he presents them):

> a year ago; perform the task; John plays golf; revolutionary new ideas appear infrequently; John loves company; sincerity frightens John; what did you do to the book, bite it?
>
> a grief ago; perform leisure; golf plays John; colorless green ideas sleep furiously; misery loves company; John frightens sincerity; what did you do to the book, understand it?
>
> a the ago; perform compel; golf plays aggressive; furiously sleep ideas green colorless; abundant loves company; John sincerity frightens; what did you do to the book, justice it?" (10).

Among scholars, it is agreed that Stein's writing is "semi-grammatical," and therefore somewhat accessible (but not traceable, as some of Chomsky's examples may be). In these examples, we can see how the transition from "conventionally grammatical" to "semi-grammatical" happens, but this transition is not clear in Stein. Her method of transition is undetectable. However, Amos practically takes us by the hand and shows us the steps, much like Chomsky exposes his method of transition. Because she uses associations that are related to content, it is possible to track what she is doing.

While Amos may have to bare all to be understandable and attract an audience, content itself is a concern for her as well; she wants the meaning out there, both for herself and her audience. I am not trying to say that she is following in Stein's gigantic footsteps, or even making that attempt. What she is doing should be viewed as filling the space or building a bridge between the "conventionally grammatical" and "semi-grammatical."

It is evident that the writing of Stein and Amos is worth comparing, as there are enough similarities, namely defamiliarizing common words and phrases, and playing with multiplicity. The differences lie mainly in the extreme complexity of Stein's work versus the more easily followed work of Amos and that Amos has *con*tent with style, while Stein seems con*tent* with style.

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